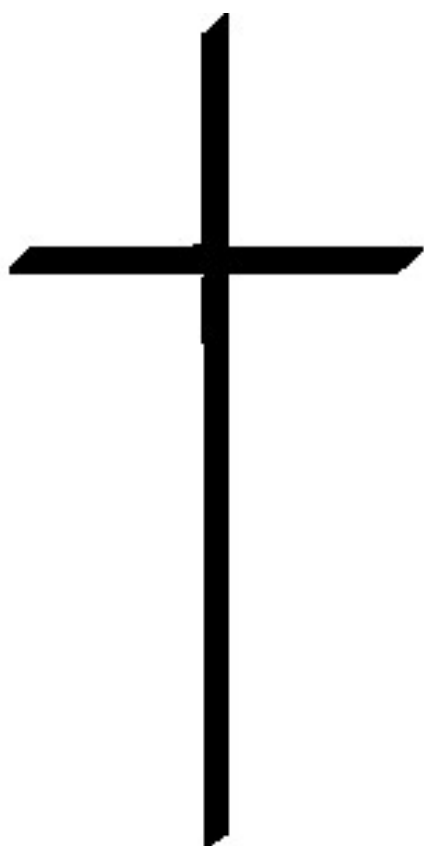


Journey to the Cross

Devotional Guides



Week Two

You may not be aware of this, but the four gospels spend an extensive amount of material specifically on the last week Jesus was alive. Here is how it breaks down in terms of each gospel:

A third of Matthew, from Matthew 21-28

A third of Mark, from Mark 11-16

A quarter of Luke, from Luke 19-24

Nearly half of John, from John 12-20

It is clear, from the sheer amount of content, that the last week of Jesus' life was of immense importance. Because He knew the cross awaited him, every action He took or word He spoke became all the more critical.

This series of devotions is called "Journey to the Cross," and is an attempt to bring into view some of the many experiences and teachings of Jesus leading up to His crucifixion on the cross. The devotions will serve in a three-fold capacity.

They will help each of us prepare our hearts for Easter. The 40 days preceding Easter have, in historical Christianity, been celebrated as the season of Lent. While the methods used to celebrate these days have varied, each Christian tradition has aimed to use this time to help Christians get spiritually ready for the good news of Easter.

They will help you get to know some church members you may not have met yet within the congregation. I asked each of our staff members to cover one week of devotions by writing one devotion themselves and by utilizing members from within their ministry sphere as the writers for each devotion. The composite of devotions intentionally covers a wide variety of members at Central. From some of our newest members, to some of our longest tenured members, from student ministry parents, to senior adults, my desire was for us to hear from parts of the congregation other than the groups we normally interact with and thus expand our understanding of how God is at work within the life of Central.

They will prepare you for the sermon each Sunday. I began the series knowing the 7 sermons I would preach beginning on February 21 and extending to April 4, Easter Sunday. From those 7 sermons I picked 6 characters, themes, or passages from the last days of Jesus that would help prepare the way for the sermon to occur on the following Sunday. As a result, if you have followed these devotions during the week, then your heart will be all the more prepared for worship each Sunday!

It has been my privilege to get to read these devotions in advance and you are in for a treat! The layout of each devotion begins with a Bible reference at the top of the page - you should read the passage first. From there, our writers have given wonderful explanations and illustrations that serve to help us know what is occurring within the text. The devotions conclude each day with some application questions that force us to do something with the truths we have just studied.

Please note, there will be a new week of devotions available to be picked up each Sunday, and we will post the devotions online so that anyone not able to come in person can still participate.

Remember, the best is yet to come!

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The Temple Cleansing

By Benny Miller

Scripture:

Matthew 21:13-17

In chapter 21 of Matthews' account of the temple cleansing, we see a clear distinction between the works of man and the intent of a loving God. The Torah required travel to Jerusalem three times a year for the festivals of Passover, Weeks (celebration of the Torah being given), and Booths (40 years of wandering in the wilderness and God's provisions). What did Jesus find inside the temple's outer court? He found money changers who became rich off the exchange rates and fees for the required annual half-shekel temple tax. Merchants would sell animals for sacrifices to be used in offerings. Many people would travel great distances and could not bring their animals with them. The local's offerings were deemed "unfit" for use. The sweet-smelling savor to God it was not.

In verse 13 our Lord traveled back in time, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people" Isaiah 56:7. At that time the Gentiles were only allowed to enter the outer court.

Solomon's prayer of dedication may have come to his mind upon entering the temple as well. "Yet regard the prayer of Your servant and his supplication, O Lord my God, and listen to the cry and the prayer which Your servant is praying before You today: that Your eyes may be open toward this temple night and day, toward the place of which You said, 'My name shall be there,' that You may hear the prayer which Your servant makes toward this place. And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive." 1Kings 8:28-30.

It is interesting in verse 14 after the cleansing "then the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them." The true purpose of the temple. May we show the blind and the lame into the temple.

For us today, 1 Corinthians 3:16 tells us we who are believers in Christ are the temples of the Holy Spirit. By the indwelling power of His Spirit, may we be the one's to point the blind and the lame, those outside the Kingdom of God, to Jesus the Messiah.

Application:

1. What would Jesus cleanse in us?
2. Are our motives pure in his sight?

Lord hear and forgive.

Dual Citizenship According to Jesus

By Davis Woodruff

Scripture:

Matthew 22:15-22

Today we find Jesus continuing to teach on His way to the cross. The religious leaders are trying to trap Him and quickly learn that you can't trap Jesus!

Who was trying to trap Jesus? The Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders who put heavy burdens of 'law' on the people and were intent on stopping Jesus. The Herodians supported the Romans. These two groups didn't get along; however, they teamed together in an attempt to trap Jesus and create more 'trouble' for Him. In this passage we see the Pharisees sending some of their disciples along with the Herodians to 'trap' Jesus with a question about paying taxes. The Pharisees believed that to pay a tax to Rome was wrong while the Herodians thought taxes to Rome should be paid.

They began with flattery (v. 15-16) before asking Jesus about paying taxes. He saw their motives just as He always does because He is God. He 'calls them out' as hypocrites or pretenders.

Notice that Jesus never answered the question asked in vs. 17. If He said pay taxes to Rome, the Jews would have been upset; and, if He had said don't pay taxes it would have been treason. When He looked at the coin, He asked them whose likeness was on the coin. When they answered Caesar, He told them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (verse 21). Scripture says they were 'amazed and went away.' Jesus had just pointed out their dual citizenship—Rome and the Kingdom of God, avoided their carefully planned trap and didn't answer the specific question they had asked.

Lessons for us in this passage:

1. We can't fool Jesus because He knows our heart.
2. We are to obey God's laws and the laws of the land which include paying taxes.
3. As believers we are citizens of two Kingdoms, an earthly kingdom and the Kingdom of God.

Application:

1. What are some reminders that we are citizens of two kingdoms?
2. How can we faithfully show our dual citizenship to those around us?

Confronting the Sadducees

By Glenn Ingouf

Scripture:

Matthew 22:23-33

Father, help us “chew” your word and digest it for spiritual nourishment. Spirit of God, teach me and refresh me in God’s Word.

Their name, Sadducees, means “righteous ones.” Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament. God spoke these words to Moses and they were studied diligently. One very strong factor in their belief system was an adamant denial of a bodily resurrection. This, they said, could never happen.

Seeing that Jesus had silenced the Pharisees, they were determined to trap Jesus themselves. That very day they approached Jesus with an odd, wildly exaggerated question of their own.

Jesus spoke truth to them. Right off, he told them they were badly mistaken! The cause? They did not really know their scripture nor did they comprehend the tremendous power of Almighty God. Next, Jesus spoke of the resurrection. He asserted we would be living in heaven which is so very different from what we experience now. Marriage will be past. Just as is true of His angels, our joy and delight will be in God alone.

Truth of resurrection is clear. He told Moses from the burning bush “My name is ‘I AM’ .This is my name forever”. Often He repeated, “I am the God of Abraham, I am the God of Isaac, I am the God of Jacob.” The tense of the verb God used is intentional and true. Never did He say He was or will be their God. These men, long gone, are alive and well today. To make it as clear as possible, Jesus said of God, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

The Sadducees were muzzled. The crowds, however, understood Jesus with astonished joy.

Application:

1. Do I know my Bible well? How can I know it better?
2. Do I often minimize God’s power? Do I ask the Holy Spirit to underline this power as I read His Word?
3. Can I share Matthew 22:32 with someone who has recently lost a believing loved one?

The Parable of the Two Sons

By Carrie Spears

Scripture:

Matthew 21:28-32

What terrible sons! When their father asked them to work for him, one outright refused and the other paid him mere lip service. Jesus asked a question at the end of this parable, and the listeners seemed to easily judge the sons' behavior. I certainly agree that the first son did the will of his Father, even though his words were lacking. However, reading through the parable a second time, I wrestled with Jesus' question on a personal level. Which son do I identify with? Am I more like the son who originally refuses but 'rethinks his position' and acts according to his father's will, or am I like the son who says what his father wants to hear but sits idly by not working? I really don't want to be like either son. I want to hear a request from my father and be ready in all things to obey in word and deed. Truthfully though, past experience too often reveals how easy it is to say a quick 'no' to my father, but what a beautiful thing it is to reconsider my position and follow through in obedience. I also remember times when I've given my father a passing, 'Yes, Lord,' but like that second son haven't followed through with action.

Both those sons knew working the vineyard would be hot, dusty and tiring. Both would probably rather relax in the cool than get their hands dirty putting in a hard day of labor. Like them, I know my Father will ask me to do difficult things. I know there will be suffering and sacrifice involved. When the time comes, I want to be ready when my father tells me to go to work. I want to stay in a posture that is prepared with a 'yes' for my Father in both words and actions.

Application:

1. What can we do today to be ready when the Father asks us to labor in his vineyard?
2. How do we prepare ourselves daily to answer Him with a 'yes' and follow through even when what He asks of us is hard?

The Parable of the Tenants

By Jonathan Spears

Scripture:

Matthew 21:33-46

Today's passage is a continuation of Jesus' response to the chief priests and elders who continued to question him after the temple cleansing. In the context of Matthew 21, the chief priests asked Jesus by what authority he was teaching these things and Jesus gives them a parable as an indirect answer. The tenants are a major part of this story, but the focus on the landowner's son who was rejected, killed and ultimately vindicated by the Father can't be underscored. The parable answers the chief priests' question, he was teaching these things by God's authority as the Son, the promised Messiah.

In the parable, the son sets out to reclaim what rightfully belongs to the father after the landowner's other servants were rejected. Similarly, Jesus' mission as the Messiah entailed restoring all that is broken in the world after Israel failed to listen to the many prophets God previously sent. The son's mission gets derailed by the very tenants the father put in place to protect the vineyard. These tenants aren't outsiders or thieves. They are the ones originally appointed to oversee the mission, but they have mistaken their leadership for ownership. In the same way, the Jewish religious leaders have forgotten their role in pointing the world to God rather than themselves. Jesus ends the parable with a powerful prophetic word of the final rejection of God's Son by the temple leaders. Verse 45 tells us the Pharisees knew he was talking about them. The Pharisees heard, they understood, yet they still rejected Jesus.

For us today, pointing our fingers at Jesus' opponents saying they are foolish and blind would be easy. After all, Matthew has made Jesus' Messiahship and mission abundantly clear. What happens when we take a step back and place ourselves in this story? All too often I see painfully and clearly in myself the same rebellious and self-serving attitude as the tenants.

Application:

Jesus told the religious leaders, the kingdom will be taken from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.

1. What sort of fruit ought we to be bearing? How is this an acknowledgement of the true owner of our lives?
2. In what areas of your life could you hand over more ownership to God?

The Seven Woes of the Scribes and Pharisees

Written by Dyroma Burroughs

Scripture:
Matthew 23

What does the word woe really mean? According to Webster, woe is a term used to express grief, regret, or distress. In Matthew 23, Jesus gave a warning against hypocrisy then He prophesied judgment on the religious elite who were guilty of hypocrisy and other sins. These exclamations of grief were addressed to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

1. Jesus accuses the leaders of being hypocrites because they were pretending to be someone they weren't. Because of their rejection of Him, they were hindering the common people from believing in Him. He claimed their lives were roadblocks to the kingdom of heaven.
2. Jesus condemns the leaders for teaching their converts about a religion of works instead of true righteousness.
3. Jesus refers to the leaders as "blind guides" because their spiritual blindness caused them to be unfit to guide others. They were blind to the identity of the Messiah, to the true meaning of Scripture, and to their own sin.
4. Jesus calls out the leaders for their hypocrisy in the practice of tithing. They made sure they gave one-tenth, but they did not show compassion or fairness or commitment.
5. Jesus points out that the leaders look clean on the outside but are dirty on the inside filled with worldly desires.
6. Jesus compares the leaders to "whitewashed tombs" which are beautiful on the outside but full of bones. They were full of ungodly feelings and thoughts.
7. Jesus addresses the lies of leaders who built tombs for the prophets and said they would have never persecuted or murdered the prophets of old, but they definitely added to the death count.

These may not seem like they apply to us today because we know we cannot be perfect, but these are most definitely applicable warnings about leading a double life. We must be wise and live in godliness by reflecting the nature of the kingdom of God in the course of everyday life. People must see Jesus in us.

Application:

1. Is your life an example of a roadblock or a bridge to the kingdom of heaven?
2. Are you fit to guide others or are you blind to your own sin?
3. Are you showing compassion and fairness? Or do you feel like you have done enough by giving your 10%?



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